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ABSTRACT

A brief reading of "Desire under the Elms" by Eugene O'Neill illustrates how a conventional Oedipal reading of the playscript opens up spaces within the text for deconstructive free-play. In this case, a tension is identified and foregrounded between this conventional application of the Oedipal complex and Freud's interpretation of the Oedipal complex, based upon a literal reading of Freud. The key play of difference is found in the opposition between pleasure and perfection, desire and structure. Hence the pleasurable becomes different from itself; it is deferred, delayed, and scattered. It is given movement by proto-writing--by the reader's inability to say what she/he means, or mean what she/he says. Because proto-writing is forever operable, new spaces are opened up with each "new" interpretation; the chain of substitution is virtually endless. (RAE)

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The Desire for Structure: A Deconstructive Analysis of *Desire Under the Elms*

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The Desire for Structure:
A Deconstructive Analysis of *Desire Under the Elms*

Eugene O'Neill has been called on many occasions America's greatest playwright. But though he had great integrity as an artist, he cannot be considered an integrated writer. This is what critics have said of him. O'Neill's process of purging himself in virtually any way he saw fit--much like his "mentor," Nietzsche--has certainly moved audiences and critics alike, but his plays often seem structurally unclear: his Dionysus is criticized for lack of Apollo. As a result, readers and critics of O'Neill's work struggle to discover the structural patterns which undergird his plays. Because his work appears intensely autobiographical, some critics look to the events of O'Neill's life to uncover the structure of his plays. Others point to his affinity for writing playscripts concerned with transcendental phenomena and look for patterns there. As O'Neill once remarked, "Most plays are concerned with the relation between man and man, but that does not interest me at all. I am interested only in the relation between man and God" (qtd. in Tornquist: 11). Consequently, religious themes are located in O'Neill's writings.

O'Neill's exploration of the transcendental stemmed in part from his early upbringing, but also from his attitudes toward modern life. Apparently, he rarely felt that he was connected to modern life and that its values were empty and uninspired. These attitudes were reinforced by his knowledge of Nietzsche and of Greek tragedy. As Tornquist wrote: "To recreate the Greek

spirit in modern life was the goal he set for himself both as a playwright and as a man. The mystical Dionysian experience of being, not an individual, but part of the Life Force, which Nietzsche found communicated in the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, O'Neill hoped to impart through his plays, to a modern audience" (11). And O'Neil' admitted: "What has influenced my plays the most is my knowledge of the drama of all time--particularly Greek tragedy" (qtd. in Tornquist: 13). Thus, critics have given us an O'Neill who was determined to move beyond this ignoble age; who continued to search for his soul against a background of decaying society; who sought refuge in a Greco-Nietzschean world-view; and who built his plays upon the structures of Greek drama. In Desire Under the Elms O'Neill gave us a play with a recognizably American locale (New England, 1850) with spiritual and emotional ties to our Puritan origins (the "hardness of God"). But he has also given us a play which invites us to read it in terms of structures found in Greek mythology.

The plot of Desire Under the Elms is well-known and relatively straightforward. It is a story of three people and a farm: the "hard," powerful, and intractable seventy-five-year-old Ephraim Cabot; his voluptuous thirty-five-year-old bride, Abby; and Ephraim's handsome and defiant youngest son, the twenty-five-year-old Eben. All three are locked in a struggle for possession of the Cabot farm. Abby has married old Cabot because she wants a home and expects, given the age of her husband, soon to inherit the farm. But old Ephraim is convinced

that only a person as hard as he deserves to own it; since no one fits that description, he plans simply to burn the place down and turn his livestock, wife, and son loose before he goes to his grave. Eben claims that the farm was originally his mother's, and that old Cabot drove her to an early grave in order to steal the property from her and Eben. Abby and Eben are, by turns, attracted to and repelled by each other. Each represents a threat to the other's claim on the property, yet neither can ignore the sexual desire they seem to arouse in each other. Before long, Abby convinces old Cabot to leave the farm to her in exchange for bearing him another son, and Eben is convinced that by consummating his desire for Abby, he can avenge the loss of his mother. After Abby bears her child, Eben learns of her duplicity when Ephraim tells him of the pact he and Abby had made. Eben is horrified to learn that Abby has used him to beget the son that would allow her to inherit the farm. In order to convince Eben that her love and passion for him are genuine, Abby murders the child and tells Ephraim that the child was not his. Eben, though, is even more horrified to learn of her infanticide and informs the sheriff. But by the time the sheriff arrives, Abby and Eben have renewed their declarations of love, and Eben confesses that he was equally culpable in the murder. The two are taken away, leaving old Cabot alone with his cows and his stones and his hard God.

Ordinarily, such a plot synopsis is followed by the declaration that it cannot possibly do justice to the depth and

Critics of this play have been only too eager to accept this invitation to form. Edgar F. Racey, Jr., for example, in his essay "Myth As Tragic Structure in Desire Under the Elms," argued that O'Neill based his play upon the Hippolytus myth, with Eben as Hippolytus, Abby as Phaedra, and Ephraim as Theseus. But Racey realized that this structure alone could not contain the playscript he sought to enclose. Therefore, he layers the Oedipus myth, the Freudian version of the Oedipus myth (since Eben usurps the role of husband with his father's wife), and a dash of Nietzschean philosophy on top of the Hippolytus myth in a kind of three-ring circus of indecidability. Still, all these structures are not enough to contain the text; they cannot forestall other possibilities. Because these structures were inadequate, Racey then decided that Desire Under the Elms should be read as a New England domestic tragedy. That is, the Cabot family is split apart in a time and place when family was the backbone of love and labor: the Cabots's tragedy is that their familial structure cannot contain their sexual and material desires.

Racey has opened up more spaces in O'Neill's text than he has closed, and his reading illustrates the ways in which this text frustrates our desire for order, pattern, and structure: each of his various myths promised to yield a reading of the play, yet each was found inadequate and so another was added. The compiled structures only provide more play of differences, more interpretive possibilities. In the Hippolytus myth, for

example, Hippolytus is usually regarded as the central figure, and in the Oedipus legend (and Freud's version thereof), Oedipus is the central figure. Neither of these structures permits Ephraim to be the major character of the play, yet most critics who propose such readings have argued that Desire's main character is the elder Cabot. He is the tragic hero: he learns that God is hard, and he is left standing alone at the play's end; his struggle was metaphysical, not physical; noble, not common. Racey concluded that "as a classic tragedy . . . Desire is both successful and complete," and he refers to Ephraim as the main character, the tragic hero (59). But which classical tragedy is Desire most akin to? What about all the other, non-classical structures he proposed? Can we now discard them? Racey is reluctant to say.

Clearly, O'Neill invites us to read his playscript in terms of such mythic structures as Racey identified: he invites us, in other words, to satisfy our desire for structure. But as our desire begins to play upon the text, as we seek out and construct alternative readings to encapsulate the play, we only succeed in opening up more holes in the text than we can close. Just as the characters' desires disrupt the structured world of the play, so do our desires disrupt whatever structure is contained in O'Neill's playscript.

Indeed, the central binary opposition at work in Desire Under the Elms is that between desire and structure. Derrida contends (after Freud) that all structures--linguistic, psychological, social, etc.--that serve to order and shape human

richness of the text in question. Critics of this play, like most plays, have taken this one step farther, claiming, in essence, that the plot itself cannot do justice to its themes and characters. Simply stated, the simplicity--even banality--of this plot is inadequate to contain the complexity of the characters and the strength of their desires. Although the play's title promises to contain, to localize, even to bury desire, it differs from itself in that its plot only allows us to discover traces of desire which point to, or promise to lead us to, some other space, some other plot, in which desire can be localized and fixed as a motivating force for the characters' strange behaviors.

O'Neill's text sets up a network of differences, a long series of opposed terms and concepts, which lure the reader with the promise of structure, of "another plot," one which will resolve these oppositions, enclose or contain desire and make it and, by extension, the play itself comprehensible. A random, and by no means exhaustive, list would include these overtly opposed terms: hard/soft, young/old, gold/rocks, mother/father, east/west, upstairs/downstairs, male/female, home/away, body/spirit, God/man, indoors/outdoors, dream/reality, man/beast, sky/earth, sun/moon. O'Neill feels our desire for order and structure by presenting these oppositions so boldly, so indelicately: we cannot miss them. And because we cannot miss them, we begin to search for or to invent the terms which will enable us to synthesize these opposites into some orderly pattern.

behavior result from acts of exclusion and repression--exclusion of the objects of our desires and repression of those desires themselves. He realizes that those repressed desires and excluded objects do not simply disappear: they return to disrupt the structure which was built to domesticate them. A deconstructive reading proceeds by dismantling this central difference between structure and desire by means of other differences that cannot be so easily identified or dismantled. As Barabara Johnson has shown, the starting point is to show that this binary opposition is simply an illusion created by the workings of differences much harder to pin down. The differences between structure and desire are based on a repression of differences within these two entities, ways in which each entity differs from itself (Johnson: x).

But the way in which a text thus differs from itself is never simple: it has a certain rigorous, contradictory logic whose effects can, up to a certain point, be read. The "deconstruction" of an opposition is thus not an annihilation of all values or differences; it is an attempt to follow the subtle, powerful effects of differences already at work within the illusion of an opposition. It is, for example, O'Neill's "New England domestic tragedy," that, in standing in opposition to the Greek tragedy it rewrites, makes visible the way in which the Greek tragedy already differed from what it had seemed to be. It is an attempt to tease out from the gaps opened up in the text by readings such as Macey's the repressed which the text struggles

not to express. Because language attempts to translate the irrational into the reasonable, deconstruction demonstrates how language is inadequate, is incapable of containing the irrational. This is the text's unsaid and its unsayable. It is not, however, an attempt to move beyond these oppositions in a kind of Hegelian Aufhebung, or sublation of differences, for that impulse is structured on an opposition between oneself and what one struggles to become. We can only show that the differences at work in this playscript do not work in the manner that we are led to think they do, and that certain subversions of them which appear in the critical literature are logically prior to them and necessary for the playscript's very construction (Johnson: xi). In this instance we shall focus on the way in which desire differs from itself in O'Neill's playscript by entering the space opened up by an Oedipal reading, i.e., by the difference between Freud's notion of the Oedipal complex and the Oedipal complex as an interpretive handle.

As is well known, to Freud, the "Oedipus complex" signified the state of affairs in which the boy craves exclusive sexual possession of his mother and feels antagonism toward his father (see Hall: 89f). The complex is mitigated, if not removed, by one factor--castration anxiety: the boy feels that his father will harm him if he persists in his desire for his mother--specifically, that the father will remove the boy's genitals. Castration becomes realistic for the boy when he sees the female anatomy: "that could happen to me." The castration anxiety causes the boy to repress his desire for his mother and his

hostility for his father and to distance himself from the mother; the Oedipus complex weakens and the boy's personality and character begin to develop.

After the boy represses his desire for the mother, he does one of two things: 1) he identifies with the lost object of desire, the mother; or 2) he intensifies his identification with the father. Which of the two he chooses depends on the strength of his masculine and feminine sides, as Freud assumed that each person is constitutionally bisexual. Stronger feminine tendencies will induce the boy to identify with the mother, and stronger male tendencies will elicit the opposite result. But there is always some identification with both, which in part resolves the desire for both. These identifications give rise to the formation of the superego, which replaces the Oedipus complex and leads to the stabilization of the personality.

The superego is of course the moral and/or the judicial branch of the personality, which strives for the ideal over the real, the perfect over the pleasurable. It develops from what the child has learned of "good" and "bad" from its parents, with the ego-ideal corresponding to the good and the conscience corresponding to the bad. The superego is built from rewards and punishments, both physical and psychological. Initially, the child desires his mother's love because it offers physical rewards and desires his father's love because he fears physical punishments. As the superego develops, it assumes from the mother and father the burden of doling out rewards and

punishments on a psychological level. The ego enacts various deeds, and the superego either rewards or punishes the ego for those deeds--whether those deeds are actually carried out or are fantasized.

Interpreting Eben as a victim of the Oedipal complex is "incorrect' by traditional interpretive standards. Given Freud's notion of the Oedipal complex, we can see that Eben's apparent "Oedipal" complex differs from itself in such a way that it overturns the traditional Freudian structure--desire itself becomes not the absence of structure, but a structuring principle. It is evident that Eben's behavior--like that of everyone else in the play--is "strange," perhaps even deviant in terms of usual social norms. But it is through no fault of his own; that is, his desire does not subvert his structuring superego: it obeys it. For Eben desires the perfect over the pleasurable--not vice-versa, as is commmonly assumed. He does only what his superego tells him to do; he makes a morally acceptable choice by fulfilling a sexual need with his "mother." Fearing punishment from his father, he makes love to Abby.

But why is this morally acceptable? If it is, what is the "reward"? And, moreover, why doesn't his father approve of this behavior which he ostensibly taught as morally acceptable? At the time of his Oedipal complex, we can assume that Eben's fear of punishment from his father was so great that Eben identified more strongly with his mother, with his own feminine characteristics. These were rewarded by his father initially, because to Ephraim everyone is soft but himself. But later these

characteristics are scorned, and Eben is accused of being too soft, like his mother. Resentful of his father's fierceness, yet wanting to please his own (feminine) superego and his father, Eben is unnaturally split within himself. He is unable to resolve his own parental and sexual identity.

When Abby arrives, he must relive his childhood, but his efforts to emulate his father, coupled with his real mother's absence, causes a sort of penis envy. That is, the castration anxiety in Eben the second time around takes its feminine form and introduces the feminine version of the Oedipal complex, i.e., the Electra complex, or the sexual desire for the father. This is unacceptable both to Eben's superego and to his own moral teacher, Ephraim, so he substitutes Abby. Eben's supposed desire for Abby, in other words, is really a repression of desire for his father; it is a choice of perfection over pleasure, of structure over desire. The substitution of his step-mother is the better of two immorals, and so Eben makes the more perfect choice. Hence, Eben feels morally in the right, and he then becomes free to rejoice in the actual love which develops from his moral choice.

This brief reading illustrates how a conventional Oedipal reading of O'Neill's playscript opens up spaces within the text for deconstructive free-play. In this case, a tension is identified and foregrounded between this conventional application of the Oedipal complex and Freud's interpretation of the Oedipal complex, based upon a literal reading of Freud. The key play of

differance is found in the opposition between pleasure and perfection, desire and structure: Eben's seeming quest for pleasure is reversed and found to be instead a quest for the perfect, the moral. Hence the pleasurable becomes different from itself; it is deferred, delayed, and scattered. It is given movement by proto-writing--by our inability to say what we mean, mean what we say. Because proto-writing is forever operable, new spaces are opened up with each "new" interpretation: the chain of substitution is virtually endless.

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